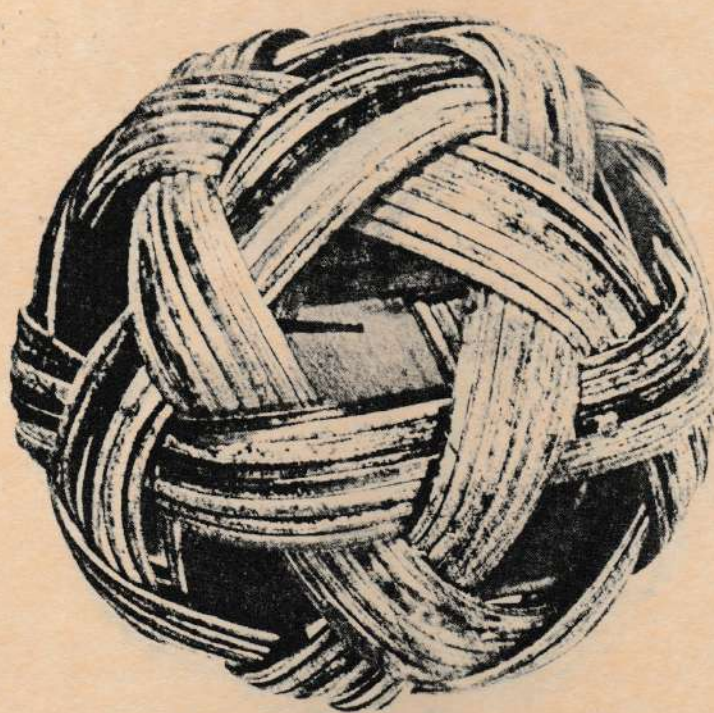




A STRUCTURAL APPROACH TO
PHILIPPINE EPICS

by

Dr. Emerita S. Quito



Professor Emerita S. Quito was awarded the first Professorial Chair in Humanities in 1980 for her outstanding contribution in the field of philosophy.

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A STRUCTURAL APPROACH TO PHILIPPINE EPICS (Focus on the *Ulahingan* and *Biag ni Lam-ang*)

by

EMERITA S. QUITO

Myths and legends are, according to Structuralist Claude Levi-Strauss, embodiments of a people's world view, value system, and philosophical thinking. It is through myths that people unconsciously express their innermost thoughts, feelings and beliefs. Levi-Strauss claims that men do not think in terms of myths but that myths are present in men's thinking without their being aware of it.¹ Myths, he says, have no authors; as soon as they are perceived as myths, they become a part of tradition, and listeners who receive the message usually assign to them a supernatural origin.²

In the course of the history of civilizations, myths have been interwoven into the epics of a people; hence, epics are instructive about the societies wherefrom they come; they also help us to expose the hidden structures of these societies; likewise, they throw light on these societies' beliefs, customs, and institutions; and finally, they permit us to have a look at certain modes of operation of the human spirit.³

Epics also define the historical position of a people or a nation, and it can be said that what the *Iliad* was to the Greeks, or the *Aeneid* to the Romans, or the *Mahabharata* to the Indians, the Philippine epics are to the Filipino people.⁴ Epics are serious in both style and substance; they constitute the "sacred history" of a people. Epics are important because they preserve the collective consciousness of a people vis-a-vis a deity or event. They also serve to popularize and pass on from place to place and from generation to the next, a people's cultural heritage. Epics serve as conceptual tools to extract the abstract notions from the particular, concrete data of a culture.⁵

The epic or ethno-epic is a story that contains a body of ancient myths and traditions centering around a supernatural or heroic person; it is a living faith in these traditions that are moulded into a single poem or group of poems and invested with a sacred character in such a way that they validate the "beliefs, ideals and life-values of a people or race."⁶

There are three stages in the study of epics: (1) the stage of analysis where the epic is broken up into parts; (2) the stage of image which calls for reflection; and (3) the stage of structure where philosophical notions begin to form.⁷

This means that initially, the researcher must immerse himself in the space-time context of the epic; he must delve into the history, mores and culture of a people in order to discover the hidden springs of the popular mind. When the preliminary images begin to form, he must speculate or assign to them meanings which he must test or validate against the existing conditions. Only after some time does he proceed to the stage of structure of the epics.

Applying the three stages of Levi-Strauss in the study of the epics, a few of our scholars have already passed the first stage of analysis where they have actually gone to the place of the epics to be immersed therein. They are also in the second stage where images, having been evolved, are being reflected upon. They are now slowly moving to the third and last stage, or the stage of structure where the elements of the epic as well as their philosophical significance come sharply into focus. From there it is hoped that eventually, they would light a wick to illuminate our spirit as a people. The study of epics would then make our spirit as a nation merge, and identify us as a people without any taint of Hispanism or Americanism.

However, Levi-Strauss says that mythical or epic analysis is like the task of Penelope. It never ends.⁸ Each weaving of a tale is a renewed hope, meanwhile suspending the solution to an old difficulty. Levi-Strauss contends that the wise man is not he who furnishes the right answers but he who poses the right questions.⁹ Hence, the study of epics is interminable.

Two epics will be discussed here because of their contrasting, yet similar, structural elements.

The *Ulahingan* of the Mindanao region and *Biag ni Lam-ang* of the Ilocos region lie on opposite ends of the spectrum of epics in terms of time, place, style and rhythm. Time, because the *Ulahingan* belongs to an older tradition whereas the *Biag ni Lam-ang* already belongs to the Hispanic era, as shown in the use of Spanish words; place, because *Biag ni Lam-ang* belongs to far north and *Ulahingan* to the far south; style, because *Biag ni Lam-ang* is forthright and easy, whereas the *Ulahingan* is complicated and long; rhythm, because the *Biag ni Lam-ang* is fast moving whereas the *Ulahingan* is slow paced; and yet, both epics underscore the structuralist view of underlying sameness and unity.

In both epics, the number 9 plays an important role. This could even be taken as a sign of grassroots or indigenous thinking. For the natives, number 9 is mystical because it is the embodiment of perfection, the symbol of the Supreme Being, the ideal number of Cycles, months, and other time periods.

The *Ulahingan* contains many portions alluding the number 9:

as a period of time:

"Nine times its leaves have fallen
A proof of the long period,
And indication of the stretch of
time." 1134-1136

as an idea of space:

"...nine strata of firmament" 2262, 4093
"Nine curves and land projections" 2885
"...nine strata of solid air" 2901
"...nine strata of enclosure" 3063
"...nine projections of coastline" 3536, 5236
"...nine coastal extensions" 3063
"...nine projections of the ocean" 4023

also as a lack:

"That there were not only nine
Immortal *sugays* dwelling
In the realm of *Udanan*; 1674-1676

In the *Biag ni Lam-ang*, the number 9 is likewise used

as a period of time:

"'Tis now nine years
Since we have threshed." 358-359

as a magic number:

"My young lady friends
Numbering twice nine
And nine times nine" 336-338

as a symbol of perfection:

"The chains of gold wire
Coiled nine times." 478-47
"Ay she is a pure lady
Like nine constellations, it is said." 495-496
"And turned it nine times
Around his back and neck." 653-654
"Through nine hills
Was he carried away." 672-673

And yet, among the "young lady friends" of Lam-ang that numbered nine times nine, Ines Cannoyan was not one of them. To this day, there are still many Filipinos who believe in magic numbers and are willing to gamble on them.

Another common denominator of Philippine epics is the betel nut. It appears in all the epics except the Bicol epic, *Ibalon* or *Handiong*. The betel nut gives magical powers. It gives superhuman strength of mind and body. In the *Ullalim*, an epic of the north, a woman who ate a betel nut became pregnant. The chewing of the betel nut was an institution in ancient Philippines. It was offered to visitors as well as to the gods.

In the two epics studied, the betel nut has similar functions. In the *Ulahingan* particularly, it is used in different ways:

as an offering:

"You foolish, lousy partner,
Very slow in offering
The betel nut chew with golden wrap;" 1176-68
"The mixture enclosed in sparkling yellow
The enticing *mema'an*.
It is indeed amusing
And surely fascinating!
Then gently, she handed it to him." 1193-1197

as a magical power:

"Ah, the betel chewers have not yet crushed
Totally the whole betel nut
They have not yet thoroughly masticated
All of the *mema'an*.
When you firmly hold and swing
The steel so gigantic
You appear as someone dreaming
As if you have just come from deep sleep." 3029-3036
"Similar to an offering
Of a prepared *mema'an*
Likened to an oblation
Of the betel nut for chewing
It did not take a long time
Indeed it did not last long
When the spear was ground to powder
And turned to dust the javelin." 5071-5078

as a pleasure:

"He then took hold
Of the cone-shaped betelnut chew
He then picked up the ready-made *mema'an*
Tenderly he pushed this through
His teeth artistically designed." 1254-1257
In the *Biag ni Lam-ang*, the betel nut was used as a

welcoming offering:

"Ay mother Unnayan
Mother please gather
The areca nut for chewing
That laughs when gathered
Because we will give betel chew
To this Lam-ang" 834-839

To this day, the Filipino is known for his legendary hospitality; he still offers a "betel nut" to guests and sometimes even deprives himself of comfort for the sake of the guests. The primitive Filipino believed in the *anting-anting* to protect him from the evil eye and there is a carry-over of this belief in many Filipinos.

The Philippines has many epics, and there is one for almost every region or important tribe. However, it is deplorable that not all of these epics have been fully studied, let alone philosophically extracted. Our study of the epics in our schools has been cursory, lacking in depth and interest. Except for the few scholars who have found time to devote serious effort to their study,¹⁰ the majority of Filipinos even among the intellectuals, are still ignorant of our epics.

Our epics have an edge over other national epics in that ours are mostly chanted. The chanters re-compose or re-create as they chant, which explains why there are several versions of one and the same epic. This means that our epics are not inert or dead. Like the spoken word, they come alive whenever they

are chanted, thereby acquiring fresh vigor and mystique. It speaks of the Filipino soul that is naturally resilient and flexible and can adapt to existing conditions. There are four known versions of the *Ulahingan*¹¹ and new versions are still being discovered; there are already five versions of the *Biag ni Lamang*. However, since the number of chanters or epic singers is dwindling, our epics need to be recorded.

The following structural elements are found in Philippine epics: (1) The epic hero is always of the ruling or upper class, rich, upright and strong. He never comes from the masses. (2) The idea of filial devotion is religiously followed. (3) The element of divine intervention or the *deus ex machine* is always present. (4) The concept of justice is seriously portrayed, giving credence to the idea that indeed, epics also express our people's value system.

These four structural elements are likewise present on other Oriental epics, notably the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* of India. In the *Ramayana*, Rama, the son of the king of Ayodhya went on voluntary exile out of filial devotion. In the end, he is helped by a superhuman force and is installed as king of Ayodhya. In the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna and his four brothers contest the throne of their father, Pandu. On the eve of battle, Krishna becomes personified as a charioteer, and advises Arjuna to go ahead with the just war against his own relatives. In the end, the Pandavas under Arjuna triumph over the Kuravas.

It can be said that these four structural elements are also components of the Asian psyche.

Several traits and values of the Filipino soul come through clearly in the epics: faith in a Supreme Being, though this could be mixed with magic; hospitality, patience, hope and trust in Divine Providence; as well as optimism, respect for elders, respect for womanhood, and male machismo.

(1) In the two Philippine epics studied, the idea of a Supreme Being is very prominent. Both epics begin with an invocation to a deity, a very personal God. This proves beyond doubt that even before the coming of the Spaniards, Filipinos had already believed in a Supreme Being. The characters throw their lot on the Supreme Being, which is perhaps the source or origin of our expression "Bahala na", really meaning "Bathala na". Deep in the Filipino breast lies the implicit trust in a Divine Being. The Filipino trusts in Divine Providence.

(2) Filipinos believe in a Supreme Judge that rights all wrongs. The wheels of justice, like the mills of the gods, "grind exceedingly slow but exceedingly fine", but in the end, the Filipino believes that justice would prevail. This accounts for his proverbial patience.

(3) Filipinos believe in a paradise similar to the biblical Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. In fact, it is what sustains the Filipino people throughout their miseries. In the *Ulahingan*, an entire tribe departs for a better location freed from the threats of enemies. During the sojourn, no different from the biblical Exodus, the tribe encounters many difficulties, but they are sustained by an Unseen Hand. The light of hope forever burns in the heart of the Filipino.

(4) Filial devotion is strong. Lamang could not wait till adulthood to look for his lost father. Bayvayan, son of Agyu, was always ready to obey his father's command even if he had to remain behind and postpone his entry into *Nelendangan*, the earthly paradise. This accounts for the Filipino's respect for elders.

(5) Another trait that comes into focus is the Filipino's respect for womanhood. Lamang revered his mother till the end. He put Ines Cannoyan, his bride, on a pedestal. In the *Ulahingan*, Mungan, the wife of Vanlak, was not left behind to die. On the contrary, the tribe sent Lena several times to bring her food. The heroine must also be the paragon of virtue; she must be chaste and pure. This idea of feminine virtue is prominent in the Filipino code of values.

(6) A correlative trait of the Filipino found in its ancient epics is the machismo of the Filipino male. All the epic heroes are rich, strong and virile. The heroes in *Labaw Donggon* and *Darangan* as well as in the *Ulahingan* and *Biag ni Lamang* are endowed with extraordinary strength. The epic hero does not truly die because he resurrects in the end. Lamang was devoured by a shark but was resurrected as soon as his bones were put together. In the *Ulahingan*, the hero's incurable disease was miraculously cured. This concept of the strength and virility of male heroes is still present in our movies. The male machismo is felt all over and the hero never dies.

This is not the case in Western epics where there are tragic heroes. Siegfried of the *Nibelungenlied* dies a glorious death while Roland in the *Chansons de Roland* is ambushed, and dies on his way back from a victorious struggle. *Beowulf* is not resurrected, or for that matter, Achilles and Hector in the Greek epics. They all die in the end.

Dead heroes do not exist in Philippine epics because hope and trust are deeply embedded in the Filipino psyche. The Filipino is confident that after a night of darkness and gloom, the sun will shine again, which is why the Filipino is optimistic. He expects all endings of life, and of stories to be happy.

The study of epics is important because it will take us back to our roots and restore our true personality and culture. Epics determine what is indigenously Filipino and what is merely a patina of culture inherited from invaders who have made inroads into our collective consciousness as a people. Our epics depict the spirit of our people, our *Volksgeist* or folk philosophy or *diwa*.¹² Epics embody our indigenous thought or grassroots philosophy because they arise from folk beliefs and are not artificially contrived. They constitute the most concrete basis of a people's psyche; they will eventually open the door to the understanding of our own Filipino soul.¹³

ENDNOTES

¹ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Le cru et le cuit* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1964), p. 20

² *ibid.*, p. 26

³ Claude Levi-Strauss, *L'homme nu*, (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1971) p. 571

⁴ Francisco R. Demetrio, S.J., "An Overview of Philippine Ethics" in KINAADMAN, Volume I, 1979, p. 9

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 910

⁶ *Le cru et le cuit*, p. 9

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 11

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 13

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 15

¹⁰ The works of Arsenio Manuel, F. Landa Jocano and Leopoldo Yabes are of particular significance. Francisco Demetrio's work on myths and epics deserves special mention. Elena Maquiso is an authority on the epics of Mindanao. Recently, an Anthology of ASEAN Literature involving Philippine epics was added to our scanty collection of literature. It was edited by Jovita Ventura-Castro, Antolina T. Antonio, Patricia Melendrez-Cruz, Josefina T. Mariano and Rosella Jean Makasiar-Puno.

¹¹ Elena G. Maquiso's *Ulahingan* was used in this article. However, there are also the Ludivina Opena and Carmen Unabia collections of the Agyu epic. Opena claims that the epic is called *Olaging* and that it deals with Agyu as the hero, and consists of the narration of the creation of the land, seas and rivers, followed by a history of the sky, of Yandang, and of the big house that belonged to Agyu and his clan. Maquiso, on the other hand, says that the Livunganen-Arumanens have two *bendigans*, or epics, namely the *Ulahingan* and the *Tulalangan*, the first epic relating Agyu's life, and the second, the life of Tulalang, Agyu's cousin. She says that there is only one *kepu'unpu'un* meaning ancient beginning or origin, and many *sengedurug* or portions of Agyu's life.

¹² Emerita S. Quito, "Structuralism and the Filipino *Volksgeist* in DIALOGUE, Manila: De La Salle University, Volume XVIII, March 1983

Also, "Filipino *Volksgeist* in Vernacular Literature" in KARUNUNGAN, Manila: De La Salle University, Volume I, 1984

¹³ *Le cru et le cuit*, p. 21

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Cover: A *sipa* ball is at the heart of traditional Manuvu games related to the chanting of epic songs and other celebrations.



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